DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 436 901 EC 307 574

AUTHOR Roth, Vicki
TITLE Building a College Disability Support Consortium.
INSTITUTION Advocacy Consortium for College Students with Disabilities, Rochester, NY.
PUB DATE 1999-00-00
NOTE 43p.; "The preparation of this booklet was made possible in part by the New York State VESID/Postsecondary Education Project Model for Improving Student Potential for Postsecondary Experiences Project."
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom (055) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Advocacy; Change Agents; Change Strategies; College Students; *Consortia; Delivery Systems; *Disabilities; Higher Education; Interprofessional Relationship; *Student Personnel Services; *Student Personnel Workers

ABSTRACT

This handbook describes the development of the Advocacy Consortium for College Students with Disabilities in Rochester, New York, and provides suggestions on how to create such consortiums. It begins by discussing the following topics: the need for advocacy consortiums to assist support providers in addressing ongoing concerns about documentation of disabilities, definitions of disabilities, the transition between high school and postsecondary life, helping faculty understand current interpretation of the laws, insurance and disabilities, the impact of technology on disability support, crisis management, and lobbying for change. The guide then discusses how to get a consortium off the ground and key issues that need to be considered. Following sections address how to maintain a consortium, forming work teams, and funding a consortium. Suggestions for long-term projects for a disability support consortium are then described, including: college nights, college panels, self-assessments to help students evaluate their readiness for postsecondary education, speakers bureaus, and information sessions for the consortium. The last section of the handbook identifies challenges for consortiums and possible solutions for problems. (CR)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

SCOPE OF INTERE 16629 EC
The ERIC Facility h this document for p to:
In our judgment, this document is also of interest to the Clearinghouses noted to the right. Indexing should reflect their special points of view. HE

ED 436 901

Building a College Disability Support Consortium

The Advocacy Consortium for College Students with Disabilities, Rochester, New York

Vicki Roth

1999

EC 307574

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Roth
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Building a College Disability Support Consortium

The Advocacy Consortium for College Students with Disabilities, Rochester, New York

Vicki Roth
1999

All of us who work with students with disabilities know that this profession offers us real personal compensations; it is genuinely rewarding to work closely with our students and to watch them thrive at our institutions. But we also know that this line of work presents us with substantial challenges. Many of our offices are understaffed, our students come to us with a bewildering array of personal and academic issues, and the legal milieu in which we must function is still new and often confusing.

So it helps to band together. Those of us in the Advocacy Consortium for College Students with Disabilities in the Rochester, New York area have found our group to be a professionally essential resource. We know that our work together has been of benefit not only to ourselves, but also to our students and, by extension, to the institutions and agencies for which we work. Through luck and perseverance, we have found, not an idiosyncratically compatible group, but rather a teamwork model that we think is of potential value to the larger profession of disability support. We are eager to pass along suggestions about this form of collaboration to others who may be considering the development or expansion of a similar consortium.

Table of Contents

How we got started 1
Getting a consortium off the ground 8
Maintaining a consortium 15
Long term projects 20
Troubleshooting 32
Summary 35

How we got started

Our own advocacy consortium began in 1989 when a small group of service providers met at one of our institutions to discuss mutual concerns about postsecondary disability support. At the time, we were impressed by the similarity of our experiences. Despite the variations in the type of our institutions and in our students, we were all struggling to establish workable documentation policies, to help faculty members see the benefits of change, to manage our programs on modest budgets, to untangle seemingly contradictory legal directives, and the like.

So we decided to keep meeting. After a decade, our network now includes service providers from all of our area colleges, which itself speaks to the commonality of these issues. Our membership, covering a sixty-mile radius, comes from local state universities, several community colleges and private liberal arts colleges, a private research institution, a business institute, and a divinity school. Our constituency goes beyond the doors of our colleges and universities, however. We also include members from state agencies, local school districts, diagnostic clinics, and disability support organizations. And, importantly, we include those with personal, as well as professional, experiences with disabilities.

Occasionally we have been asked how we find such a disparate group to be of specific benefit to us, but we have come to understand that this mix of professional and personal experience has made our consortium meaningful and energetic. These cross currents of ideas and experiences have kept our meetings from devolving into tired rehearsals of the same complaints; when a problem is on the table, someone in the group usually has a response that seems novel and creative to the rest of us.

We have never a instituted a charter or written rulebook for ourselves, but we certainly have relied on the guidance of our internal steering committee and a core group within our membership. A fluid structure for our work together has evolved over time, in keeping with the changing goals and tasks we have set for ourselves.

The definition of a disability support consortium—in brief

In the larger sense, a good consortium is a network that comes together on a regular basis to share ideas, information, and resources to support the successful postsecondary education of students with disabilities. There is considerable room in this definition to respond to different needs and agendas at varying locations; the consortium model is a flexible one that can be adapted across a broad range of institutional environments.

The need for a consortium

Why is the consortium model important to our profession? After all, we have access to a mind-boggling array of information about disability issues through our professional journals, organizations and conferences, and we can readily tap into the abundant data available on-line about these topics. All of these resources are important—and any good consortium makes full use of them. But they cannot take the place of genuine, face-to-face meetings in which people come together to grapple with and solve real problems. It is exactly this sort of format that a solid team can provide.

But it is rare to have wide-ranging teams available at our individual institutions, and few of us have all of the resources we need on site. All too often, we find ourselves pressed to meet the daily obligations of our programs; we

find ourselves too busy to organize creative problem solving sessions independently.

We also face considerable financial management pressure. Although many services for students with disabilities are not costly to our institutions, other accommodations can be quite expensive. We are under the gun to make appropriate financial choices, often within newly formed budget structures.

The continued evolution of disability law represents another challenge to our profession. We are now well past the initial impact of the Americans with Disabilities Act; as a society, we are now fully into the second wave of decisions and cases that have been generated by this civil rights legislation. The ADA and other disability laws, as we all know, are broadly written and so are constantly being defined and tested in the courts. Keeping up with the implications of the latest rulings is an intricate task, made all the more complex by the weight of the legal responsibility that our institutions and we ourselves bear.

Yet another dilemma is the inconsistency in professional and program development across the country. A good metaphor for these variations in services can be found in levels of computer expertise in our general population: some people are fully "wired"; many are probably in the middle, with meaningful computer experience under their belts, but with limitations and gaps in their knowledge base. Still others have yet to touch a keyboard. As time goes on, the gap becomes hard to close independently, especially for those lagging farthest behind; computer neophytes need other "people resources" to help them fill in the blanks.

The same is true for our disability support programs. Some of us work in full-service departments, where students can expect complete and up-to-date programming for disability needs. Most probably have intermedi

ate programs at this point in time; we offer many services, but we are still aware of gaps in our programs and in our own store of information. Some institutions, however, have not yet really gotten off the ground in terms of a disability support *program*; they may be stuck in the "case by case" mode, e.g., where decisions about disability concerns are made piecemeal, and accommodations are created without the benefit of articulated policy and a trained staff to follow through with these decisions. Given that the ADA and other disability laws represent civil rights legislation, this inconsistent implementation should be considered unacceptable. While the application of these laws needs to be tailored to the specifics of time and place, the fundamental nature of these rights should be considered a constant in our society. But it is hard to establish consistency when most of us spend our days working as independent agents.

Even on campuses with highly developed support programs, we come up against some issues that seem to be less amenable to change. At many institutions, we have developed "good enough" strategies for a large share of the first-order problems that we face. For example, most programs probably have worked out reliable ways to manage requests for extended time on exams or alternative testing locations. But the longer-term, more complex issues continue to prove difficult. Few of us, for instance, have ready-made solutions for big-ticket items, like elevator installations, or for deeply institutionalized inequities, such as the strong bias against reimbursements for mental health costs built into many insurance policies. It is difficult for any of us to address these larger scale concerns both independently and successfully.

Also, as time has passed, a backlash against disability support has made itself felt on some campuses. A few highly publicized examples of this resistance, in which the professional credibility of campus support providers was

very publicly called into question, have made us all aware of the intensity of these negative attitudes and their power to disrupt services for our students. Without some form of collective benchmarking and bargaining in place, we are left on our own, should the need for "disability defense" arise.

In sum, the world of the support provider includes very real responsibilities, often with too few people on the staff and considerable stress placed on ourselves as individuals. So we need to build "departments" for ourselves that cut across the boundary lines of our campuses; we need an accessible network of real people to consult with who share our concerns and commitment to the profession. A disability support consortium is a model that can provide these resources.

What specific issues are a good match for the consortium model?

We have found the following issues to be of importance to our group, and well-suited to discussion and problem solving through a consortium format.

a. **Ongoing concerns about documentation of disabilities.** Who is qualified to document disabilities? What kinds of paperwork do we need to have on file? How old can an assessment be and still constitute legal validation of a disability? On our campuses, who should be entitled to make policies regarding documentation? Who should have access to this paperwork, once it has been filed in our offices? How do any of these requirements vary depending on type or degree of disability?

b. **Definition of disabilities.** What degree of hearing loss, for example, constitutes a hearing impairment? How do we understand and plan for students with poorly understood disabilities like attention deficit

disorder and chronic fatigue syndrome? Where can we get useful information about less common disabilities like Meniere's disease or Crohn's disease? Does obesity count as a disability?

c. **The transition between high school and postsecondary life.** How do we help current high school students plan appropriately for college? What can we do to help them become their own best advocates? How can we make sure that the necessary paperwork follows them from high school to college—and that students understand what this documentation says about them? How can we help their families make the transition as well?

d. **Helping faculty.** How can we encourage instructors, who typically have no special training in disability issues, to respond well to these matters? How can we help them understand the nature of their own professional and legal obligations? How can we mediate conflicts so that all parties are satisfied with the results?

e. **Understanding current interpretation of the laws.** How can we keep up with specific rulings and their implications for postsecondary disability services?

How do we get answers to our own particular legal questions? How can we get support if we find ourselves on the wrong end of a lawsuit?

f. **Insurance and disabilities.** What do we need to know about typical insurance coverage in relationship to disability issues, especially in terms of diagnosis and evaluation costs? How can we advocate for the inclusion of appropriate coverage in student health insurance packages?

g. **The impact of technology on disability support.** What are the best technological aids currently available for our students? How can we make good matches between specific students and particular types of equipment and software? What creative funding sources can we find to help our programs and our students acquire these aids?

h. **Crisis management.** What can we do when a situation spins out of control? How can we keep everyone—including ourselves—from letting frustration and anger get in the way of good problem solving?

i. **Lobbying for change.** Not all the work of a good consortium is reactive. Having so much expertise pooled in one organization provides a natural instrument for leveraging positive change. Individual consortium members benefit by having a local "expert panel" to draw upon when the need arises to make a case to campus administrators. A consortium as a whole can lobby for appropriate changes in agency and governmental regulations. There is power in numbers.

Getting a consortium off the ground

A team succeeds when it seems authentic and valuable to its membership. A series of meetings that seem like obligations or a set of tasks that feel like "make work" are almost sure to kill the spark that makes for an enthusiastic work group.

So if you are ready to pull together a new consortium—or to re-invigorate a previously formed, but tired group—you would be wise to invest time in listening to your colleagues. Begin by looking for the immediate and burning topics of the day in your region; what are the issues that bother people? What are the problems they can't quite solve? On a more positive note, what are the successful strategies that people would enjoy showing off? Where are the exemplar programs, or even pieces of programs, that colleagues at other institutions should know more about?

An interest meeting is an excellent way to collect this sort of information and to see if there is enough common ground within the group to warrant further collaboration. In setting up such a meeting, you would be wise to spend more time thinking through your guest list than worrying in too much detail about the specifics of the agenda. Look for those people who are the key players in disability support in your region. As you might guess, these people may or may not be the staff members at various campuses and agencies who have the most upscale job titles. Sometimes a title and the job duties completed by the person filling it are a good match; in other cases, you may find that the people who really get the job done have much less visible stature. In any case, you want to pull together those who are invested in the

real work of disability support. The guest list *has* to include people who have personal experiences with disabilities.

You also want to find people who like to work in teams. A consortium functions much better without prima donnas. To compare this to the world of music, you are hoping to find a group of people who will form a good ensemble, rather than a group of solo artists.

When encouraging people to come to the interest meeting, the personal touch is invaluable. A general invitation in the mail may get a few people to attend, but a phone call like this is likely to work much better: "A few of us are getting together in a couple of weeks to talk over some of the disability issues we are all dealing with. We're really hoping that you could come because we know your input would make a difference." Making people feel personally needed works. A goal might be to have ten to twenty people actually show up at the first meeting. More than that, and you will end up talking *at* rather than *with* the group; a group smaller than ten makes it hard for the consortium idea to seem real.

Once you get a group together for an interest meeting, a lightly organized agenda helps people make the most of their time together. A one and a half- to two-hour session is probably about ideal. The most essential part of the meeting is most likely to happen within the first fifteen minutes or so, when people share a cup of coffee together and get acquainted. Make sure everyone knows each other's names and institutional affiliations at this meeting and at all successive sessions together. In fact, even after a decade, the Rochester consortium still begins nearly every meeting with introductions, since there is nearly always someone in attendance for the first time. We also pass around a piece of paper to collect names of attendees. At an initial meeting, it is a good idea to ask people to jot down their names, addresses, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses as well.

When it is time to get down to business, a good place to begin is by asking people a general, but "packed" question like: "What are some of the hardest parts of your job?" A good strategy for capturing the ideas that are sure to flow from this question is to have large Post-It notes and a marker on hand. Then ask someone in the group to write abbreviated versions of each answer on separate notes. Post the ideas on the wall in the order they show up. For example, here are some issues that your group might generate during the first few minutes of conversation:

- not enough money in the budget
- faculty attitudes
- paying for interpreters
- can't get needed equipment
- can't get information needed from students' prior records
- don't know how to help students get good assessments
- getting material converted to Braille
- paying for notetakers
- overly concerned parents
- uninvolved parents
- convincing administrators
- training for my general staff
- training notetakers
- recordkeeping
- unprepared students
- getting books on tape
- wheelchair access on campus
- student/staff ratio too large

As the group gets this sort of thing off their collective chests, the facilitator's most challenging job is to keep this discussion in brainstorming mode. It is important to restrain the group from leaping in with solutions for each other's concerns right away, since your goal is to help them recognize how many of their concerns overlap. So give this some time; let a fairly large number of items get posted on the board. Then, you can let the group see how these ideas fall into categories. For instance, the items listed above might be grouped as follows:

Money matters

- not enough money in the budget
- paying for notetakers
- wheelchair access on campus
- can't get the equipment my students need
- paying for interpreters
- student/staff ratio too large

Documentation and paperwork

- can't get information needed from students' prior records
- don't know how to help students get good assessments
- recordkeeping

Accommodations

- getting material converted to Braille
- getting books on tape

Feelings and attitudes

- overly concerned parents faculty attitudes
- uninvolved parents
- convincing administrators

Or they might be categorized slightly differently:

Working with administrators

- not enough money in the budget
- paying for interpreters
- can't get the equipment my students need
- student/staff ratio too large
- convincing administrators
- wheelchair access on my campus

Working with my colleagues

- can't get information needed from students' prior records
- getting material converted to Braille
- training notetakers
- training for my general staff
- recordkeeping
- getting books on tape

Working with faculty

- faculty attitudes

Working with families

- overly concerned parents
- uninvolved parents
- unprepared students
- don't know how to help students get good assessments

The exact ordering is not important; in fact, a talented facilitator will coax the group away from becoming too fixed on getting these categories "just right." Again, the objective is to let the group discover that, despite inherent differences in their specific jobs, much of this sort of work is the same from place to place. By the time these items are categorized on the board, some people are going to be very eager to share their own personal best solutions to these issues. It helps to have someone willing to keep a light record of this part of the discussion as well.

With any luck, your time will run out before the ideas do. This is the moment for someone to say, "I can see we've got a lot more to talk about. What do you think? Should we get together again?" Try to walk out of the meeting with an actual date, time, and place for the next session—and, importantly, that list of names and addresses that was passed around the room. Another significant question to ask is "Who else should be here next time?" The group is sure to think of colleagues who could make intelligent contributions to future discussions.

After the first meeting

The very next step, what happens after the interest meeting, is crucial to the long-term viability of the group. We have all been involved in meetings and conferences during which great ideas were floated about, only to see them die later because no one kept things aloft. So, a post-meeting investment of time is essential.

Here is what needs doing:

A. Someone needs to convert *the list of names and addresses into a readily accessible format.* We have found that creating a Filemaker Pro database has worked well. It is a widely used, easily learned program that creates

databases tailored to specific needs. Information can be entered and deleted readily, and, importantly for this purpose, mailing labels can be quickly generated. Disks and hard copies of these addresses are easily made for distribution to the other members at the next meeting.

B *Minutes of the meeting need to be sent out to those who attended.* It is best if these minutes are not too official and formalized; you don't want them to look like the Congressional Record. Instead, this should be more like a friendly memo, letting people know that it was good to see them, and that you wanted them to have these notes about the discussion for their review.

C. *An invitation to the next meeting should be included,* along with the suggestion that it be passed along to other potentially interested parties. We have learned to include maps and parking information with all of our meeting announcements; if we truly want people to feel comfortable about working together, we know we have to help them make their way to our different sites. This seems like a small matter, but it is one of those little connections that helps people make a commitment to the next meeting.

Maintaining a consortium

A consortium works—or fails to—because of the personal relationships within the group. This is such a fundamental idea that it should be considered the guiding principle governing the maintenance of the consortium. The investment of real effort in building working relationships is essential.

Given this, it is important that people have the opportunity to meet frequently. Some professional organizations meet yearly, or semi-annually; this format can offer its membership some useful professional support, but it probably rarely makes for a real working group. We believe that our consortium took hold because we made the decision from the beginning that we would schedule work sessions for the group on a monthly basis (with some time off during the summer).

Rotating meeting sites among the member institutions and agencies also works well. This spreads responsibility across the membership since no one has to play host too often. Also, because the host for each meeting assumes the direction of that month's agenda, each institution takes a leadership role every so often. This ensures that all points of view get real recognition during the course of the year's meetings. By visiting each other's home turf, the members come to know a great deal more about the working environments of our peers, which in turn, helps us understand what we all need from our group. A wonderful additional benefit can result from the group's visibility to campus administrators.

It is important that each meeting begin with time for the members to have coffee with each other. Just like at the original interest meeting, this social time is not a waste; the renewal of collegial friendships each month can very well be the most important segment of the meeting.

When the group is ready to get down to work, reviewing what happened at the last meeting always makes sense. Some members will not have attended the previous meeting, so they need updating, and those who were in attendance need time to refresh their thoughts and clarify what should happen next in regard to individual agenda items.

An important part of the meeting is the announcement of upcoming events and programs. Since a good consortium includes members from a wide range of institutions and agencies, these announcements are usually of real benefit to the group—we can bring an impressive mix of events to each other's attention. We also talk about state and national conferences; these discussions allow us, in this time of limited travel budgets, to trade information gleaned at these meetings with a wider group.

In a similar vein, monthly meetings can also offer the opportunity to discuss current events in disability support, like recent court rulings and news from colleges and universities outside the consortium's region. From time to time, the group may decide to respond collectively to an important issue. For instance, our consortium composed a group letter in reaction to the 1996 situation at Boston University; on another occasion, we wrote to our state's commissioner of education to state our position on proposed changes in graduation requirements for Regent's Diplomas. Also as a group, we have addressed the State Department of Education regarding changes in eligibility requirements.

Probably the most popular segment of our meetings is the few minutes each month we call "ICU," as in "intensive care unit" *for ourselves.* This is basically an "I have a student who..." time, when individual members bring problem situations to the table, with the hope that the group has some positive solutions to offer. Clearly there is a need for the group to work out an approach to confidentiality, not only for the ICU sessions, but for the meetings as a whole. For legal and general ethical reasons, it is important that all group members understand that no information that could be used to identify individual students should be shared in the meetings. In practice, this has proved easy to work out, since it is usually the general issue that needs to be addressed, not the specifics related to a particular student or faculty member. Here are ways some typical ICU scenarios might be presented, ranging from the fairly benign to the more incendiary, but in all cases, maintaining the confidentiality of the students and instructors involved:

I have a student coming in next semester who has severe carpal tunnel syndrome. Who knows the best place to get information about computer adaptations for him?

One of our faculty members is demanding to know precisely how much extra time—and why—one of my students should have for a multiple choice exam. He wants this justification down to the minute. What are some good ways to handle this?

I've heard that my office may be sued by an angry student and her parents over a problem with wheelchair access. Anyone here have some experience with this?

Forming Work Teams

As the consortium develops, your meetings can include time devoted to establishing and maintaining the group's ongoing projects. It will become clear, via the monthly discussions, that there are some issues that merit a collective effort from the group, but selecting which of these concerns to tackle as a consortium takes some insightful planning. Taking on too much can easily overwhelm the group, especially since most of the members are likely to feel fairly deluged by their own daily work responsibilities. Conversely, starting projects that seem insignificant is likely to result in a disengaged, unmotivated group. Once our consortium had progressed beyond its "getting acquainted" stage, we devoted two of our monthly meetings in their entirety to brainstorming and formulating plans of action for the group. We did this by returning to our original list of problems and concerns, and then sorting out which of these matched well with our group's interests and resources. This sorting resulted in loosely organized task forces. For example, our group started out with several such groups, one working on issues related to the transition from high school to postsecondary education, one dealing with faculty and staff training, and another with resources. Before long, we added a fourth group devoted to technology. As time has gone on, we have revisited these groupings, and modified them to fit our current interests and abilities. Some of the tangible results of these task forces are outlined later in this report.

Funding a Consortium

A group does not need many financial resources to get off the ground. At first, all you are likely to require is a little money for coffee, bagels, and postage for invita

tions and minutes. Our group functioned quite well for several years on this basis, with each of our host institutions paying for a light breakfast for the group and one month's mailing costs. Since these were once per year expenses for each of our schools and agencies, this approach turned out to be very feasible for us.

As your consortium takes fire, however, you will see that some desirable activities and programming cost more than you can squeeze out of your departments' budgets for miscellaneous expenses. This is the time to look for larger institutional and grant support. Some members may find a helpful dean or provost who is willing to designate some funds for future development. This proves to be a little tricky, however, because the consortium will inevitably turn over authority to the institution that holds the pursestrings. If one or two schools are funding the consortium, the rest of the members cannot really be equal players.

A better approach might be to seek funding for the group as a whole. Chances are good that, in a consortium of this sort, several of the members will have had successful development and grant writing experience. They can teach the rest of the group about locating requests for proposals, pulling together administrative support, writing the proposal itself, and implementing the project if the funding is awarded.

If, by some chance, your group does not include members with successful grant histories, there are a number of resources available that help first-timers get that first proposal sent to an appropriate funding source. Try searching the calls for proposals from the State and U.S. Departments of Education. And don't forget the development and research offices on your larger campuses; even if you are not planning an institution-specific proposal, they should be able to help you locate materials and information for the group.

Long-term projects for a disability support consortium

Below are descriptions of some of the activities our consortium has sponsored. Our goal here is not to proscribe the mission and intention of other consortia, but rather to outline the type of projects that fit well within this teamwork model.

College Night

What is it?

One of the easiest activities for a group of this sort, College Night involves the staffing of a consortium table at local college fairs. The best approach is to form a team of students and support service providers who represent several of the local colleges and universities.

Who is it for?

Most of the attendees at college fairs are high school juniors and seniors and their families. The target audience for the consortium's activities is, of course, prospective college students with disabilities.

What is the goal?

The inclusion of a "disability table" at a college fair lets students with special needs know that they are welcome at our area institutions, and it encourages them to begin thinking about transition concerns.

Secondly, it keeps disability issues in front of the admissions staff from our colleges and universities. This itself turns out to be a meaningful objective, since prospective students usually regard admissions officers as the front line for questions related to disability support. It is in everyone's best interest to keep them informed.

How difficult is it to do?

This is a very simple way for the consortium to conduct an outreach activity, requiring only a modest amount of pre-planning.

How much does it cost?

This costs nothing, except for the duplicating charges for your handouts and display materials.

What needs to be done?

Participation in College Nights requires that contact be made with those who are sponsoring the fairs in your area and that the "consortium team" gets together to prepare materials about your programs for distribution to prospective students.

It is probably a good idea as well to speak with the admissions departments from your institutions before the event. They should know who will be representing the local institutions, and importantly, they need to know something about the mission and goals of the consortium and the individual offices represented by your group. It helps to remember that the turnover in many admissions offices around the country is high. Just because last year's staff was fully apprised of your programming, do not assume that the current staff is equally aware; it may be a substantially different group this year.

College Panels

What is it?

Participation in College Nights, as outlined above, is essentially piggybacking on someone else's program. College Panels, however, are entirely consortium-centered affairs, although they can be co-sponsored with an agency or a local school district.

A College Panel is an event, usually held in the evening, during which students from area institutions discuss the impact of their disabilities on their college lives. It works well to have a couple of disability support providers serve as moderators of these discussions—and as sources of information for questions that go beyond the student panelists' personal experiences.

Who is it for?

High school juniors and seniors and their parents most typically come to these meetings, but occasionally younger students, especially those with more substantial disabilities, are in attendance as well. We also hope to reach some of the local district's resource room teachers, guidance counselors, and transition specialists at these events.

What is the goal?

A College Panel is intended to jump-start the thinking process for students with disabilities and their families. We want to help students understand the differences in the laws and procedures that govern disability support at the college level compared to those in force in their local districts. We want them to think about their own strengths and specific needs that require accommodations and to decide what they should request from their postsecondary institutions.

We hope their families will begin to think about what it will take to turn over responsibility for the disability to their sons and daughters—not an easy task for most parents, given that many of them have raised successful students by working assertively to make sure all the proper supports have been in place during their school years. They need help in letting go.

Getting the message to local school district personnel is crucial as well. Too often, we assume that high school staff members understand the pressures and requirements of disability support at the college level, when, in fact, there are few natural mechanisms in place in our educational world that encourage college and high school personnel to hold discussions regularly on these topics. Listening to real-life college students helps them forecast what their current students are going to face in a few short months or years.

How difficult is it to do?

College Nights require some pre-planning, but are quite easy to conduct. We have found that most of the audience is only mildly interested in hearing what we have to say; they are much more compelled by the stories and advice offered by the college students on the panel. This seems like the "real stuff" to everyone concerned.

How much does it cost?

Except for mailing costs, and perhaps charges for light refreshments, this activity does not cost anything.

What needs to be done?

Setting up a College Panel first requires contact with someone in a local school district. Chances are good

that the consortium itself will include such a person; if not, it is likely that someone in your group will have made previous connections with potential contacts. Since there are regulations in many districts requiring attention to transition issues, often district staff members are eager to work with a consortium on such a plan.

Once the date, time, and place for the event have been established, it is necessary to build an audience. Local staff members are crucial in this respect; they have daily contact with your targeted audience, and they are likely to have mailing lists for family contacts. Similarly, the transition specialists in your region may be able to help with fliers and announcements.

It is important to select the members of your student panels carefully. Of course, you want to find students who feel comfortable in speaking about their disability in public; it is also valuable to make sure you have a cross section of students. It helps to have several of the local colleges and universities represented, and to make sure that there is a mix of age, gender, and type of disability.

Picking the moderator requires that you find someone who enjoys working a crowd. Since the audience usually brings with it a fair measure of natural, intrinsic motivation for these topics, leading these sessions usually does not require a great deal of coaxing and cajoling.

We always distribute a supply of information packets about the disability support programs at our institutions, and we make sure that we ask everyone in attendance to complete an evaluation form. These assessments not only help us improve our next panels, but they also help us make further contact with individual audience members, since they frequently note questions or comments on these forms that make for good follow-up.

From Here to There

What is it?

From Here to There is a paper and pencil self-assessment designed to help students evaluate their readiness for postsecondary education.

Who is it for?

The primary audience for this publication is high school juniors and seniors. In addition to a regular English print edition, Spanish and Braille versions are also available. Also, we have prepared a modified edition for returning adult students. Our intention is that students work through this evaluation tool with a coach, perhaps a resource room teacher or a guidance counselor. The completion of this assessment results in a summary page, which can be sent to the admissions department or the disability support office at the student's postsecondary school.

What is the goal?

The objective of this assessment is to help students who are making the transition to a new educational environment map out the details of their strengths and weaknesses, both in terms of general living skills and academic proficiency. An important secondary goal is the promotion of their ability to explain these issues to others and to forecast how matters may look different across time as they go through inevitable changes.

How difficult is it to do?

The creation of a transition assessment of this sort is a fairly challenging assignment for a consortium; this is probably a year-long project. There is little need for anyone to reinvent the wheel, however; our consor

tium is happy to provide copies of *From Here to There*, a training manual, and in-person instruction in the use of this instrument.

How much does it cost?

If a group intends to create its own self-assessment tool, the following expenses need to be considered:

1. Release time for someone to write the document
2. The costs of layout and design
3. Printing costs
4. The costs of training sessions for coaches
5. Distribution and mailing expenses

If your group would like to make use of any of the current versions of *From Here to There*, the per-booklet costs and ordering information can be found on page 44.

What needs to be done?

A brainstorming session is a good place to begin if your group decides to put together its own assessment tool. List the issues and concerns your students bring to you, with a special focus on those problems that seem opaque to the students as they enter your institutions.

Someone then needs to turn these notes into a document that others can use and readily understand. This drafting and formatting work demands attention both to the educational and developmental needs of the students and to the practical requirements of the printing and copying resources available to you.

Speakers Bureau

What is it?

A consortium forms a natural speakers bureau. Since members from several types of institutions, representing a mix of professional experiences and expertise, comprise a group of this sort, it is easy to compile a list of those who are willing to travel to other institutions and agencies to make presentations about disability issues.

Who is it for?

A speakers bureau can offer presentations for a wide range of audiences. The most likely groups would be faculty and staff from local schools in your region; districts typically have a certain number of required in-service days for its employees, and it is to our benefit to make sure that disability issues are part of this continued educational dialogue in our local districts. We have also found that college groups, local agencies, disability support groups, and parents' organizations are interested in the information our group has to offer.

What is the goal?

The objective of the speakers bureau is severalfold. First, we hope to make use of our pooled expertise for students in our community at large. Secondly, we want to help parents and educators in the region focus on the next stage of their students' educational lives. It is easy to fix only on the crises and issues of the moment; we all need a little nudging toward the consideration of other, more distant issues. Finally, a speakers bureau makes personal contacts possible. It is something of a social challenge for anyone to "cold call" our institutions and hope to make a good contact

with the person in charge of disability support. However, once an audience meets us in person—and we follow up with lists of consortium names and addresses—further conversations are natural and easy.

How difficult is it to do?

Establishing a speakers bureau is fairly easy; maintaining this project requires that someone in the group be designated the bureau manager.

How much does it cost?

Except for materials duplication, there is little cost to the consortium in creating this project. In fact, the sponsoring agency or school is often willing to defray travel costs, and, on occasion, to offer speakers small honoraria.

What needs to be done?

The manager for the speakers bureau needs to invest only a modest amount of time in this project. Here's what needs to be done:

1. The project needs to be announced to the group, and speakers need to be recruited. It makes sense to categorize a speakers list by areas of expertise; some members are going to be more adept in diagnostic issues, for example, while others will have more experience in, say, campus access for students who use wheelchairs.
2. The bureau needs to be marketed to the community. Look for ways to include items in newsletters produced by local school districts and disability agencies to describe the service and list contact information. Similarly, parents' groups are likely to have some means of communicating with their member. Advertising for a

speakers bureau is not a one-time only affair; it needs to be repeated, probably on a yearly basis.

3. The manager needs to set up a tracking system to take requests for speakers and to make sure these engagements have been appropriately assigned to individual members of the group.
4. Some form of evaluation needs to be implemented. If the bureau is to be a viable and useful project, we need to find ways to make sure the service we are delivering meets the needs of our audience.

Information Sessions for the Consortium

What is it?

A real plus of the consortium model is the opportunities that arise to infuse new information into the organization. A group of this sort can sponsor many sorts of information-gathering sessions for itself. For example, we have asked attorneys with specialties in disability law to come to meetings to explain the latest relevant court decisions to our group. On other occasions, we have brought together local diagnosticians so we could discuss the impact of neuropsychological and psychoeducational reports on decision making and accommodations in a college environment.

At other consortium information sessions, we have brought in out-of-town speakers so we can tap into a new pool of professional experience. Sometimes, looking to the expertise of our own group, we have asked specific members to make formal, organized presentations on given topics of interest, like the use of closed captioning systems and the understanding of current learning theories.

Who is it for?

We ourselves are the targeted audience for these sessions, sometimes in concert with other consortia in the larger region. Making ongoing contributions to our students and to our institutions requires that we look to the enhancement of our own knowledge base, and it is in the interest of our own careers to make sure that we continue to evolve professionally.

What is the goal?

There can be many reasons to hold consortium information meetings. For instance, sessions with local diagnosticians can address concerns about the effectiveness of documentation formats and recommendations. Asking an attorney to make a presentation helps consortium members address our own judicial issues, and to double-check the goodness of fit between institutional policies and procedures and contemporary legal opinion.

How difficult is it to do?

Setting up an information session can be as easy as making a few phone calls, or it can be as complex as organizing a small conference, complete with flying in speakers, booking conference rooms, and making arrangements with caterers.

How much does it cost?

An information meeting that is modest in scope can be equally modest in expense. Usually we can find rooms at our institutions for free, leaving only mailing and refreshments to the consortium. Naturally, a more ambitious information session that is essentially a small conference will be more expensive. Lecturers' fees vary widely, but do not be deterred from asking a prominent figure in the field to speak to your group.

Sometimes key professionals have such a vested interest the issues at hand that they are willing to make presentations to our groups for surprisingly reasonable fees. Airfare and hotel costs for out-of-town speakers, of course, need to be worked into the budget. This is one area where a co-sponsorship with a local college or university can be a very wise collaboration. Both the school and the consortium can benefit, and, because this is a one-time affair, accepting funds from a specific institution is unlikely to co-opt the collaborative nature of the consortium as a whole.

What needs to be done?

Setting up an information session just for the sake of having one is probably a waste of your group's energy. Instead, this format is better suited as a means of meeting the consortium's long-standing concerns. So the first step is identifying what those intractable issues are and then deciding if the expertise necessary to address these matters is available locally, or if the group would be better served by bringing in someone from outside the region.

Before you contact potential speakers, it works best if the group has established a location and several possible dates for this future meeting. A small meeting needs a couple of months' lead time; one of substantial scope requires six months or more. Of course, a discussion of budget matters needs to be part of the planning. The group should determine if this is to be a consortium-only meeting, or whether it should be open to a larger audience. It makes sense to set up individual committees to handle specific tasks, like mailing invitations, making contacts with the conference site, and setting up catering arrangements. Spreading out the responsibility helps to prevent burn-out, and it also makes these events feel more like team activities.

Troubleshooting

A consortium is a useful, but not perfect, model. Despite good will and hearty effort, groups of this sort may run into trouble every so often. Here is what we have learned about smoothing out those inevitable bumps in the road.

- **The group is having a little trouble taking off—or maybe it has lost steam.**

  A genuine sense of collaboration takes time to develop. Maybe your group just needs to keep plugging along for awhile until enough shared experience has been amassed to make the group cohere.

  Or maybe you have yet to gather the right mix of people. Ask around, there probably are dynamic people in your region who could make an energizing contribution to your group. It helps to include at least a few senior, well-respected members of the profession in your group who can lend their experience and credibility to the organization. Conversely, it is also a good idea to seek out younger colleagues who are just making a new career for themselves. They can bring considerable intensity and motivation to your efforts. And there is no question that those who have disabilities themselves, both staff and students, need to be part of this group. Upgrading support services is a very high stakes goal for those with disabilities; they better than anyone else understand that this improvement is an immediate and necessary objective for our postsecondary institutions.

- **You perceive an inconsistent level of commitment and effort within the group.**

  Maybe the best way to address this problem is to stop defining it as such. As long as your group has a sturdy core of committed members, an overall inconsistency of commitment may not be a problem at all. We have felt that our consortium serves three tiers of members: the central group, who shows up as often as humanly possible, a second, somewhat larger group, who attend most of the meetings and can be relied on to respond to calls to action, and a third set of members who touch base with the group now and then. It is tempting for some of the more committed members to harbor ill will towards this less invested group. Resist this—and scale back your group's responsibilities to match the interest level and resources of your most committed members.

- **Members complain about a lack of time for the group.**

  Overwork is epidemic in our profession; few of us have the luxury of working in a department that is fully staffed and equipped. So it is not surprising that disability support providers sometimes feel that they cannot devote time to a group of this sort.

  The correct response to this is to help others recognize that this sense of being overburdened is the largest proof that, in truth, we can't afford *not* to work together. The only plausible way our profession can continue its development is if we believe in the power of collaboration.

  In practical sense, we need to make it easy for groups to convene. We have found that 9 o'clock breakfast meetings are almost ideal. Members can attend our

sessions and still make it to their respective offices for a meaningful part of the day. We have tried to make sure that some of our task forces are made up of members who live in proximity to each other, so they can get together quickly for an extra meeting now and then.

Once the consortium's work starts to pay off, and the members realize that their pooled efforts have *saved* time, it becomes all the easier for everyone to continue making personal investments in the group.

Summary

If we can step back from the often overwhelming nature of our day-to-day obligations so that we can look at matters on a large scale, we perhaps should feel a little proud. We may be part of the first generation in recent human history to take seriously the cultural responsibility for integrating those of us with disabilities fully into the fabric of our work and educational lives. If we are serious about our commitment to this goal, we need each other. We believe that a college disability consortium is a robust and adaptable model that makes evident the strength in numbers.

From Here to There

From Here to There Assessment

High School Student	$1.00 each
Adult learner	$1.70 each
Spanish	$1.80 each

From Here to There Training Manual

$7.00 + $3.00 postage

These materials may be ordered from:

Rochester Regional Transition Coordination Site
Monroe No. 1 BOCES
41 O'Connor Road
Fairport New York 14450
716/377-4660 x 2730

Acknowledgments

The preparation of this booklet was made possible in part by the New York State VESID/Postsecondary Education Project Model for Improving Student Potential for Postsecondary Experiences project.

We welcome your comments and questions. Please contact us at:

vrth@mail.rochester.edu

Members of the Advocacy Consortium for College Students with Disabilities, Rochester, NY

- Amcraft
- Board of Cooperative Educational Services Monroe No. 1
- Board of Cooperative Educational Services Monroe No. 2
- BOCES Regional Transit Coordinator Site
- Bryant and Stratton
- Colgate Rochester Divinity School
- Community Learning Development Center
- Finger Lakes Community College
- Genesee Community College
- Greece Central Schools
- Hobart and William Smith Colleges
- Keuka College
- Learning Disabilities Association of the Genesee Valley, Inc.
- Monroe Community College
- Nazareth College
- New York Chiropractic College
- New York State Commission for the Blind and Visually Handicapped
- Rochester Regional Transition Collaboration Site
- Roberts Wesleyan College
- Rochester Business Institute
- Rochester Center for Independent Living
- Rochester Institiute of Technology
- St. John Fisher College
- SUNY Empire State College
- SUNY Brockport
- SUNY Geneseo
- University of Rochester
- VESID
- Webster High School